

Highlands Ranch
161 Holman Way
Sedalia Vicinity
Douglas County
Colorado

HABS No. CO-47

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COLO,
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Rocky Mountain Regional Office
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 25287
Denver, Colorado 80225

THE HIGHLANDS RANCH

An Historical Sketch

The area covered by Highlands Ranch has been the scene of much activity down through the years. For the past several thousand years, it was a well known spot to the various tribes of wandering Indians, particularly for its stone which could be worked into arrow heads and spear points. In more recent times, it was doubtless visited by the local Indians of the Colorado region - The Utes, The Cheyenne, The Arapahoe and others. But these people have left relatively little behind them as evidence of their stay.

The first non-Indians in the region were almost certainly Spanish explorers. Though the Spanish never established permanent settlements in what we know today as Colorado, they often visited the area. The earliest visit by a Spaniard could have been in 1541, when Juan Francisco de Coronado perhaps crossed the southern tip of the state in his search for gold. There is no evidence that the Spanish came to this particular locale, but in view of the many expeditions that came close, either to explore, to pursue hostile Indians or to recapture escaped slaves, it is likely that their paths crossed the ranch.

Prior to 1753, the ranch property was claimed by France as a part of their Louisiana. At that time they gave the territory to Spain under the terms of the Treaty of Paris. In 1800, with Napoleon dominating continental Europe, the area again became French, under the Treaty of San Ildefonso. Then in 1803, Napoleon abruptly sold the Louisiana Territory to the young United States. There followed a long, drawn-out period of almost random exploration, that brought the first Americans close to Highlands Ranch.

Visits by Zebulon Pike in 1807, and Major Stephen Long in 1820, who both followed the front range south from the Platte River, may have

provided the opportunity for the first official visit. At any rate they came close. Other expeditions that passed through the immediate area were those of Colonel Henry Dodge, in 1835, and the flamboyant John Charles Fremont, whose expeditions in the 1840's and in 1853, brought him through the area on several occasions.

However, the fur trade brought the largest number of Americans to Colorado during this period. Hundreds of rugged, independent mountain men found their way across what Long had termed "The Great American Desert" to pursue the curious little aquatic animal whose fur was a fad of the wealthy. No stream, no pond, no valley was left unexplored by these hardy men. There is no question but that sometime, perhaps many times, during the period 1811-1840, many a leather-clad white man, and occasionally a black mountain man like Jim Beckwourth, crossed the future site of the ranch.

Between 1840-1859, when the fur trade was in decline, and before gold was discovered in paying quantities, a number of curious men made their way to this region. Men like Rufus Sage, Dr. Wizzlizenus, William Gilpin, Frederick Ruxton and many others came to see what this area had to offer. We are fortunate that many of them left descriptions of what they saw, which added to the growing fund of knowledge.

The Pike's Peak Gold Rush was the major motivator for large numbers of people to come to what was to be Colorado. Founded mainly on myth and promotion, and encouraged by a depression in 1857, the rush brought 100,000 people west across 'the Desert'. Only 50,000 came all the way and only 25,000 stayed. But these hardy few formed the nucleus of a new territory. Numbers of Americans scoured the area in their search for gold. Though the Douglas County area had several mines, none of them proved to be major bonanzas.

The real wealth of the area remained to be discovered by a different breed of people - cattlemen and farmers. More patient, perhaps,

than their gold-seeking counterparts, they sought to make a more modest fortune by using the land in a different, less destructive way. The first to take up a homestead on the present Highlands Ranch was David Gregory, who filed for 80 acres in section 6, township 6S, range 68W, on January 4th, 1867. By the end of the year, he had two neighbors, Charles Babcock and Jesse Estack, who filed in the same section. David Gregory lost his homestead and it reverted to the public land rolls in 1870, soon to be homesteaded by others with more determination.

Between 1867 and 1910, when Lillie Hosack filed on 80 acres in S20, T6, R67W, no less than 189 individual filings were made on the present Highlands Ranch. Of these, 60 were cancelled. A number of companies also owned property here, such as the Union Pacific Railroad, the Pueblo and Arkansas Valley Railroad and the Kansas Pacific Railroad. Many of these people built primitive homes of stone, log and perhaps sod, but it appears that none have survived.

In the 1890's, two men, John W. Springer and Johanne Welte, began to increase their holdings and build sizeable ranches for themselves. Though Springer and Welte were different types, and though they achieved their purposes through somewhat different means, both were eminently successful.

John Springer was born July 16, 1859, in Jacksonville, Illinois, to John and Sara (Henderson) Springer, a family of some local prominence. A geneological study done for the family, traced the line to the Springers of Germany (A.D. 1089), and from thence to such notables as the Czar and Grand Duchesse of Russia, Charlemagne (A.D. 742), Otto the Illustrious, and finally, Alfred the Great. Springer's father was a lawyer, and an uncle was a member of Congress. John Springer attended De Pauw University where he earned a Bachelor of Arts degree. He then attended the law school and was admitted to the bar in 1880. After a tour of Europe, he settled down and practiced

law in Jacksonville for about 10 years. During the 50th Congress, he was appointed clerk of the Committee on the Territories for the House of Representatives.

The year 1891 was an auspicious one for John Springer. He was a member of the Illinois State Legislature, and was also engaged in banking in Dallas, Texas. It was his contacts with Dallas that were to prove most fruitful for him, however, for on June 17th of that year, he married Eliza Clifton Hughes, the daughter of the wealthy cattleman and financier, Colonel W. E. Hughes. Colonel Hughes was president of the Continental Land and Cattle Company, with large landholdings in Montana and Texas, \$3,000,000.00 worth of corporate stock, and 75,000 head of cattle. Springer was swiftly appointed vice-president.

His wife's ill-health forced a move to Denver, where he quickly rose to local prominence. In the fall of 1897, he was on the committee which set up the first National Livestock Association. When the meeting took place in Denver, at the Coliseum, on January 25, 26 and 27, 1898, more than a thousand delegates came, despite severe weather. Governor Alva Adams of Colorado called the meeting to order, and Governor W.A. Richards of Wyoming proposed that Springer be made temporary president of the convention. The motion was seconded by Lt. Governor Jared L. Brush, of Colorado, and A.P. Bush of Texas. It was under his skilled leadership that the National Cattlemen's Association got under way. He was elected president, and held that post until the NCA merged with the American Cattle Growers Association, in 1904.

These years were busy ones for John Springer. He was active in Republican politics, and was their candidate for mayor of Denver, in 1904. He was twice promoted by the Colorado delegation for the national vice-presidential office, first with Theodore Roosevelt, and again in 1908 with William Howard Taft.

Not all went well for him, however. In 1904, his wife died, and he married his second wife, Isabelle shortly thereafter. Isabelle brought him scandal, and he divorced her. He remained single until 1934, when he married Mrs. Jeanette Elisabeth Lotave. He was then 74 years old.

Though Springer lived to the age of 85, he was in ill health for the last 13 years of his life, the result of a major operation in 1932. By that time he had acquired an impressive list of accomplishments: apart from the ones already mentioned, he founded the Continental Trust, was a director of Capitol Bank, an officer of the Chamber of Commerce, a promoter of the Colorado Sugar Beet industry and a member of the Denver Country Club, The Denver Athletic Club, The University Club and The Gentlemen's Riding and Driving Club. He died at St. Joseph's Hospital in January, 1945.

If Springer had been born with advantages, Johanne Welte was not. Welte was an immigrant, born in Blons, Austria in 1843. He landed in New York in April 1867, and quickly, perhaps wisely, headed west, reaching Denver via Chicago and St. Paul. In 1872, he formed a partnership with Plazidus Gassner in the plastering business before homesteading in Douglas County.

In 1878, Welte married Miss Theresa Berlinger, and in the following years, they produced three daughters. In 1879, he built the ranch-house that was known as the Big Dry Creek Cheese Ranch, and where he and his descendants manufactured Brick and Limburger Cheese for more than half a century.

Their dairy farm, for such it had to be to produce cheese, was started with 21 cows. As the demand for their products grew, they prospered and added a hog-house, a slaughter house, granaries, an ice house, a stone cistern, and carpenter and blacksmith shops. They also acquired more land, which eventually totaled several thousand acres.

Welte was an ingenious individual. He devised a water system for the cheese factory: "an ingenious use of pipes conveyed the water from boiler to house and factory, and back to the boiler for re-heating." The main source of energy was cow chips. By the 1890's, he was so well known for his innovations, that people came from all parts of the country to observe his methods. In 1906, Scientific Farmer interviewed him, and they were most impressed with his dry land farming techniques, and with the success that he enjoyed with his orchards. By that time he had added 10 acres of apple, cherry, plum and pear trees. He also grew alfalfa, wheat, barley, corn, and mangle-wurzels, a type of beet fit only for cattle.

Each man was representative of a type often found in Colorado, and yet, though different, each man gained his success through essentially the same application of his land. The key to their success lay in seeing that this was not only farm land but ranching country, and for ranching, you needed room. The small 160 acre homesteads that the government offered were not enough to raise cattle and horses; it would take 40 acres to feed just one cow and her calf. With this in mind, in 1898, John Springer began acquiring land on the present site of Highlands Ranch. In February, he bought 160 acres from Mary Burkard, one of the original homesteaders. For the next few years, he actively pursued all available land in the area. During this time, Springer also purchased much of Johanne Welte's property. Springer, then with more than 23,000 acres, became the largest landowner in the present ranch area.

Mr. Springer began renovation and construction of his ranch house about 1898. The original building on the site of the present headquarters mansion may have been started around 1891. Just how much was done by the time that Springer took over is difficult to tell, but the original design was a western style, made largely from local fieldstone. He continued to add to it for the next 20

years, eventually completing almost 60% of the present structure. The style that is so evident today, however, was undertaken in the 1920's, when Frank Kistler owned it.

In 1898, Springer's father-in-law, Col. Hughes, decided to move his headquarters to Denver, and established himself in Suite 101 of the Boston Building.

After the death of his first wife, Eliza Clifton Hughes, Springer left the ranch, and it was said that Col. Hughes at a later time stabled horses in the ranch house.

By the early nineteen hundreds, Springer was getting on in years and when approached by Waite Phillips, one of the brothers who founded Phillips Petroleum, eventually sold to him. In October of 1920, Phillips purchased Annie Clifton Hughes' 10,900 acre Sunlands Ranch, and in December purchased Springer's ranch.

In 1926, Phillips sold out to Wolhurst Stock Farms for \$425,000.00. The president of this corporation was Frank E. Kistler, however, the corporation may have been wholly owned by Kistler. There is also evidence that Kistler and Phillips were business associates. One source suggests that Phillips owed Kistler for services and transferred the ranch to pay for it. Possibly part of the ranch was paid for in this manner, but in 1932, Kistler was forced to refinance \$100,000.00 of the debt through the First National Bank and Trust of Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Kistler converted the ranch into a breeding ranch specializing in dairy/angus cattle, and various pure-bred sheep, hogs and chickens. In a brochure published under the logo The Diamond K Ranch, he mentioned that the ranch was a combination of Highlands Ranch, Wolhurst Farm, Blakeland Poultry Farm, Plum Creek Ranch, Grig's Farm and the O'Neill Farm.

At the same time, he set about adding the final 40% of the mansion and altering the style to a classic Tudor. He hired architect J. B. Benedict to provide the design and spent tens of thousands creating a mansion of the finest style and proportions. The six fireplaces which adorn the various rooms and nine bedrooms, each with its associated bathroom, either singly or ensuite, allowed for entertaining in a grand style. Hardwood floors, a secret panel and passage way, hand painted wall designs, and much more, all helped to create a style of life reminiscent of the finest homes of Europe. The exterior, it's original fieldstone and ironstone rock facade now garnished with gables and a plentiful supply of carved woodwork, provided its owner with elegance.

Though Frank Kistler's taste cannot be faulted, his economics, in a time of national stress, left something to be desired. The signs of difficulty showed up in 1932, when he was forced to refinance \$100,000.00 of his loan. Apparently he was able to pay this off, but by 1937, he was again in financial difficulties. Thus it was that he sold the entire property to Lawrence C. Phipps, Jr., an associate whom he encouraged to form a foxhunt (the Arapahoe Hunt Club) on the southern part of the ranch in 1929. The price of the ranch, as listed in the records, was a paltry \$100.00.

Kistler never got the remodelling urge out of his blood. He headed up to Glenwood Springs, where he remodelled the old Colorado Hotel.

The new owner's father, Lawrence C. Phipps Sr., made his fortune with Carnegie Steel, when as a bright and rising young man he was offered by Andrew Carnegie, and accepted, a small percentage of the growing company. He worked his way up to vice-president and treasurer of the Carnegie Corporation.

About 1901, he moved his family to Denver and engaged in business for several years, also serving as U.S. Senator from 1919 to 1931. His sons and grandsons went on to become prominent leaders of industry

in Colorado, and are today involved in trucking, professional sports (the Denver Broncos), ranching and real estate, among other occupations and interests.

The Phipps family acquired the property as a residence and a working ranch, and under the skillful management of Lawrence Phipps, Jr., the property once again prospered. Some acreage was added at this time, from the East Ranch and the Cheese Ranch and some outer parcels were sold off, until it reached its present 22,009 acre size.

Lawrence Phipps, Jr. died in 1976, and it was decided shortly after to sell Highlands Ranch. The new purchaser was Marvin Davis, of Davis Oil Corporation. He formed Highland Venturers Corporation to handle the marketing of the property, and in 1978 Mission Viejo Company took an option to purchase the property.

People will now take the place of cattle and horses, and homes will stand where barns and cabins, long since gone, once stood. But when some small child finds an Indian arrow head in the dirt, or when visitors gaze upon the magnificent mansion of the Headquarters Ranch, or the characterful homestead of the Cheese Ranch, that colorful past will live once more, and remind us all of our splendid heritage.

Additional Points of Interest

The oldest remaining structures on the ranch property are the Cheese Ranch house and barn, dating from approximately 1879. Other nineteenth century structures include a portion of the Headquarters Ranch mansion and one of the barns, the Fred Kistler homestead in the southern portion of the ranch, the East Ranch homestead and the Burkhardt homestead remains in the northwest portion of the ranch.

During the prohibition era, 1917-1934, a number of local entrepreneurs set up small stills on the property; one man reputedly coming all the way from Germany. He set up his still near the Highline Canal in the northwest corner of the ranch, near the present Davlin home. Supposedly he was never caught. Another still site was on the Cheese Ranch, where the production of alcohol may have replaced the production of that more mundane product.

The Arapahoe Hunt Club is a group whose favorite form of exercise is the chasing of coyotes over hill and dale on the southern part of the ranch and into neighboring property. So that animal lovers will not be offended, it should be noted that the coyote is seldom caught, and in fact seems to see the hunt as an opportunity to tease his (very distantly) related British cousins.

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